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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001806

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: PKK ATTACK PUTS MILITARY UNDER A MICROSCOPE

REF: A. ANKARA 1732

[1](#)B. ANKARA 1440

[1](#)C. ANKARA 430

Classified By: DCM Doug Silliman, Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Since the October 3-4 PKK attack on the Aktutun military outpost, Turkey's military has come under unprecedented press criticism. This included calls for the resignation of the Deputy Chief of Staff (for failing to prevent the attack) and of the Chief of Turkey's Air Force (for being caught playing golf at a resort following the attack). Most explosive was an October 14 article by left-leaning newspaper Taraf publishing intelligence information purportedly leaked from the Turkish General Staff (TGS) which indicated that the TGS had received advance warning of the Aktutun attack, but took no action to prevent it. On October 15, TGS Chief General Basbug gave an angry reaction to the criticism, sharply rebuked the press for publishing classified information -- which could give aid to terrorists -- and "warned" that such behavior would not be tolerated. The ruling AKP party has thus far defended the TGS anti-terrorism action, but press rejection (by influential columnists on October 16) of Gen. Basbug's rebuke may begin to weaken this solidarity. End Summary.

Igsiz in the Crosshairs

[1](#)2. (C) Oddly enough, one reason for the new level of press criticism is a new policy -- implemented since Gen. Ilker Basbug became TGS Chief in August 2008 -- which is trying to establish a new, more open, relationship with the press. On October 5, TGS Deputy Chief General Hasan Igsiz briefed the press extensively following a deadly PKK terrorist attack against a military outpost in Aktutun (ref a). Instead of applauding the TGS for its increased transparency, many in the media savaged the military, zeroing in on Igsiz's statement that the TGS did not move some of the vulnerable border outposts, including Aktutun, due in part to a lack of funds. The Ministry of Finance subsequently announced that the TGS had returned unused funds to the Treasury this year, further undercutting the military in public.

[1](#)3. (C) Opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) Treasurer and Istanbul MP Mustafa Ozyurek publicly called Igsiz's claim of the TGS lacking funds "a shame for Turkey," and said "Why is it that the necessary budget allocation could not be found given the enormous budget dedicated to national defense?" The Turkish public's anger has been further fueled by images

of these outposts' shoddy construction, claims based on allegedly leaked classified documents indicating that the military received advance intelligence warnings about a possible attack on Aktutun, and that Igsiz, during his previous assignment as Second Army Commander, visited Aktutun three times and still took no action to improve or relocate the facility.

"Golf-Gate"

14. (C) Turkish Air Force Chief Babaoglu has also been weathering calls for his resignation after images surfaced in the media of him golfing at a Mediterranean resort on October 4, the day after the Aktutun attack. In response to questions, Babaoglu said he had been unaware of the attack until later, a claim the TGS backed with an official statement released on its website. Media commentators have rejected this explanation given the blanket coverage the attack received on October 3 and 4, and have asked whether it is better that the air force chief was unaware of a deadly attack against Turkish forces or that he kept golfing despite the attack. Gungor Mengi and Ismet Berkan, columnists for moderate Vatan and liberal Radikal papers, respectively, have publicly called for Babaoglu's resignation in their columns. Revelations that the Turkish military had constructed golf courses on nine Air Force bases and at a military academy have fueled the scandal and led CHP Deputy from Konya Atilla Kart to submit a motion to investigate decision-making and expenditures associated with the construction of these golf courses.

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Basbug Fires Back

15. (C) Responding to the press stories, General Basbug, in a brief, harshly-worded statement to the press on October 15, warned the media to stop attacks against the Turkish armed forces. Basbug said that the 2nd Army is investigating the Aktutun attack, and vowed to share the results with the public. He also said judicial authorities are investigating the leaks of classified information that have fueled the criticism against the military. Calling the media criticism a "systematic attack" against the Turkish military, Basbug said, "Such attacks are not based on accurate knowledge and go beyond the limit of (fair) criticism. It is predictable how any military would respond to such attacks." Basbug concluded by urging "everyone to be careful and to take a correct position," and accused journalists who termed the attack on Aktutun as a success of supporting the PKK's goals.

16. (C) Media reaction to Basbug's statement was equally harsh. While respecting Basbug's desire to defend the integrity of the military, commentators across the political spectrum criticized Basbug's tone as harsh, threatening, inappropriate and lacking respect for press freedom. Milliyet editor Sedat Ergin wrote, "Basbug can use such an approach in army headquarters, but not in dealings with the media." Mainstream Hurriyet columnist Oktay Eksi noted Basbug's tone was irritating the media world. Islamist-leaning Yeni Safak columnist Ali Bayramoglu called Basbug's statement a "declaration of war" and wrote that "in democratic countries, army commanders cannot dare to direct such accusations against the media. The military should understand that they cannot silence the criticism by shouting and hurling threats." Influential Radikal columnist Murat Yetkin called Basbug's statement "disappointing."

Erdogan, Gul Support the Military - Sort Of

17. (C) Despite on-going tension between the institutions on other issues, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP)

has again felt the need to defend the military in the midst of public and opposition criticism. President Gul said publicly on October 15, "No comment or criticism shall aim at weakening the struggle of the military and police forces." Prime Minister Erdogan on October 10 said he believes the military is "sincerely doing its best." Erdogan had also backed the military in public statements in August and February when the military came under opposition and media criticism (refs b and c).

Comment

18. (C) Although the Turkish military has long been, and continues to be, the most widely respected institution in Turkey, it has not been immune to public criticism, particularly in its intervention in politics and alleged involvement of military officers in the "Ergenekon" plot. This latest round of criticism following the Aktutun attack is unusual not only because of its breadth and staying power, but also because the focus of the criticism has been on the way the military conducts one of its primary missions: fighting the PKK.

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